

THE OENACH

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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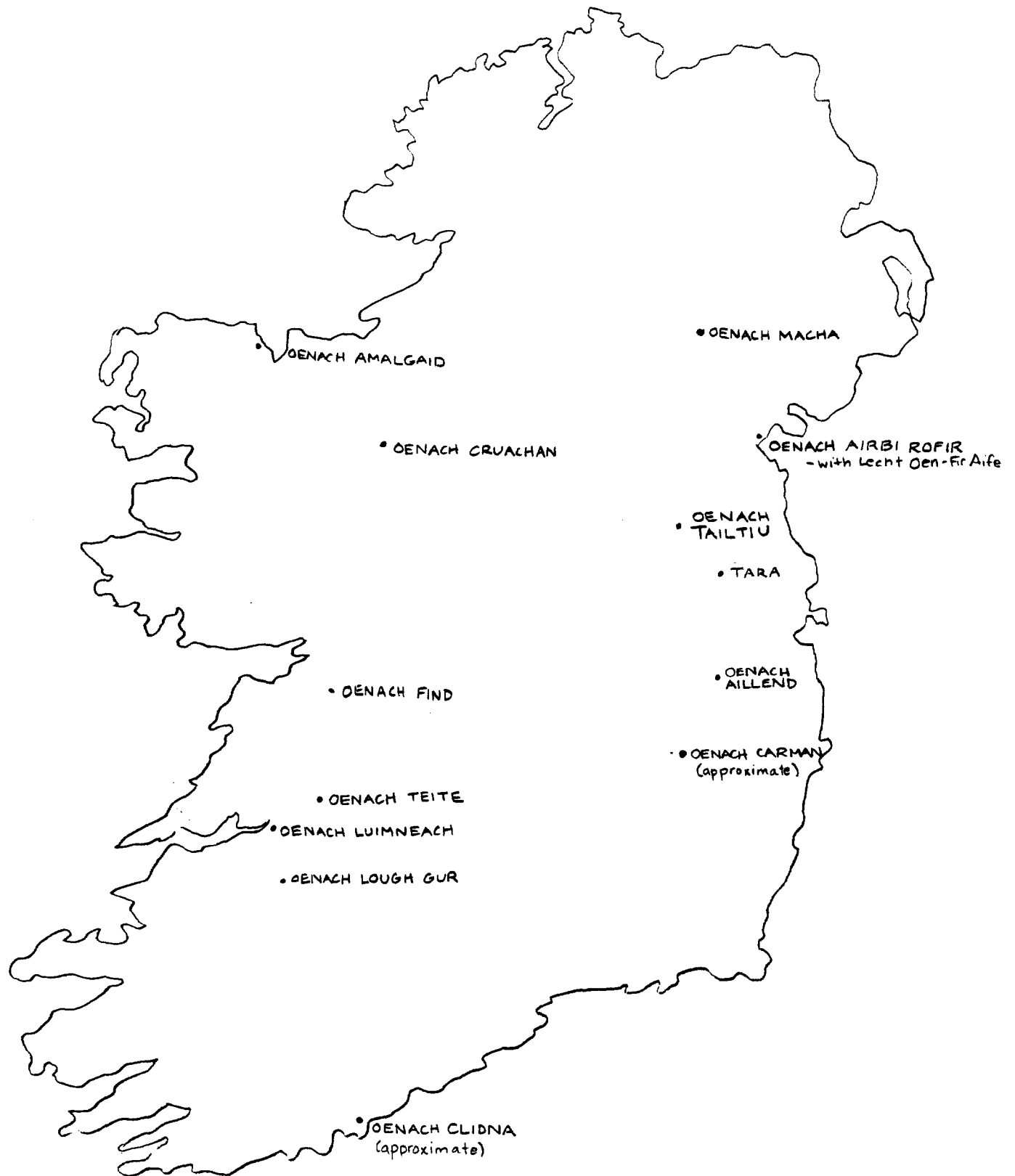
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Purpose of Thesis

This paper explores the traditions and history surrounding the Irish oenach. The oenach was a provincial assembly which began in the pagan Celtic past of Ireland and continued in some areas until modern times. The mythological symbols behind the oenach will be discussed and analyzed in terms of their social, political, and ritual functions. This paper will also look at the geographical distribution and archaeological significance of the meeting sites and seek to set a date for the oenachs' beginnings. Mythology, folklore, and old Irish literature will be used to come to an understanding of the themes and beliefs behind this Irish tradition.

DISTRIBUTION MAP OF THE OENACHS



There are many questions surrounding the oenach. Most historical texts describe it as a provincial assembly, led by the local king as a harvest fair for his people. Some texts allude to the ritual significance of the oenachs by stating that they were celebrated on ancient burial grounds during the sacred festival of Lughnasa. Other texts focus on the economic and political significance of the fair and portray it as a mere market or trading place. Yet the ancient literature and rich folk tradition of Ireland refer to the oenach as a festival which combines all spheres of Irish life.

While the sources offer up a wealth of information about the oenach they also leave many questions unanswered. How and why did the oenachs begin? When did they begin? What is the significance of the mythology which surrounds them? What was the relationship between the King and the oenach, and how was this symbolized and ritualized? What activities took place at the fair? How did the oenach function socially? politically? economically? And how did the oenach survive through Christianization? the Norse and English invasions? These and many other inquiries will be made into the story of the oenach.

Two main themes run through the traditions of the oenach: death and agriculture. The oenachs began primarily as a sacred assembly at the burial of special individuals.

Yet they were also attached to the agricultural cycle and were celebrated at Lughnasa, the harvest festival in August. The connection between death and agriculture is bridged by the relationship between the goddess and the god. The goddess represents the death of the land and the god the force which creates her rebirth. The connection between these two themes is also symbolized by a mythological battle between the forces of nature and those who wish to control the earth to bring about her fruitfulness.

After discussing the symbols and mythology which surround the oenach, this paper will look at the oenach in actual practice. It will then seek to answer the question: How were the mythologies and beliefs transformed into a working assembly? It will trace the symbolic progression of the oenach: how goddess, god, and battles carry over into the actual practice of the oenach; how the local king, representing the god, joins in a ritual marriage to the land by holding the oenach; and how the king symbolizes the wealth of the land by bringing the people together to enjoy a time of feasting, entertainment, horse races, and games.

This paper will conclude with an exploration of the history of the oenachs, reaching back into their pre-historical past to find the date at which they began. It will then move on to the "invasions" of Christianity, the Norse and the English, and relate how these changed the nature of the oenach. It will then finish with a look at

the oenach's survival into modern times.

There are many sources of information on the oenach. One of the most important to this paper is the dindshenchas. The dindshenchas are place-name tales which were written during the twelfth century. Though recorded at such a late date, they retain an older quality which had been handed down orally, poet to poet, for perhaps hundreds of years. Other written sources from the Medieval period include the Annals, pseudo-historical texts such as the Lebor Gabala Erenn, and mythological traditions as passed on through various tracts. Modern folklore, the work of recent scholars, and archaeological evidence will also be considered.

The Onomasticon Goedelicum, a listing of places in Ireland and Scotland as found in the ancient literature, gives evidence of over thirty different oenachs.¹ However, only about twelve of these will be discussed in this paper. The most extensive information is found on the oenachs of Tailtiu, Carman, and Macha, and these will be explored in detail. Other sites include Lough Gur, Aillend, Clidna, Luimneach, Teite, Find, Cruachan, Amalgaid, Uchbad, and Oengussa. A map of the distribution of these sites is also included.

The oenachs began before written records were being

¹Edmund Hogan, Onomasticon Goedelicum: Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co, 1910) 558-559.

kept. Written records of the assemblies come from the Middle Ages, when the learned were also the Christianized. Therefore, much of what is known about the fairs is tainted with their biases. Indeed, when Cuan O Lothchain recited his poem on Oenach Tailtiu in 1006,² he put these words concerning the oenach's beginnings into the mouth of St. Patrick:

Victorious was the proud law of nature,
though it was not made in obedience to God,
the Lord was magnifying it.³

Even so, the dindshenchas as well as other books from this time period store a wealth of information about the oenachs, from their beginnings in the past of mythology to their social and political uses during the Middle Ages.

The theme of death and burial begins with the physical landscape of the oenachs. These sites were chosen because of their significance as burial grounds. When King Amalgaid mac Fiachra Elgach decided to build his own cairn he chose a place where he could live and be buried, where he could hold the oenach, and wherein "the hosts of [his] line rested quiet in the ancient place of burial."⁴ Oenach

²D.A. Binchy, "The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara," Eriu XVIII (1958): 113-138.

³Edward Gwynn, The Metrical Dindshenchas, vol. X (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1913) 153.

⁴Gwynn 423.

Carman is another "a burial-ground of kings."⁵ The site of Oenach Cruachan is the burial ground for the Tuatha De Danann, the ancient tribe of the gods of Ireland.⁶ Of the seven primreilge, "chief cemeteries," of Ireland, three are also the sites of oenachs.⁷

Yet these are not "cemeteries" as we know them, where communities bury all of their dead, but are sacred sites where selected individuals were chosen for burial. John Waddell notes that most Irish cemeteries are small and only served a fraction of the population. They are "places where token burials were made by several communities to placate spirits or to strengthen a social or political alliance."⁸ The origins of the oenach were probably small, tribal meetings of a ritual nature which were held to signify the cohesion between different communities.

Even though the earliest burials were not of "kings and queens," the sacred significance of the burial gave the dead a high status. Waddell states "their dead were honoured in this way...because they were about to have a new role in society and become revered ancestors."⁹ It can be noted

⁵Gwynn, vol. X: 3.

⁶Gwynn 433.

⁷Hogan 558-559.

⁸John Waddell, "Death in the Earlier Bronze Age," in Irish Archaeology Illustrated, ed. by Michael Ryan, (Dublin: Country House, 1994) 88.

⁹John Waddell, as qtd. in Ryan, 88.

that the literature refers to the oenachs as "noble cemeteries" for the burial of kings and queens, not the common individual. Even when Maire MacNeill visited Teltown (the modern name of the ancient Tailtiu) in the middle of this century, she met a local man who said that the queen of Ireland was buried there.¹⁰

The ritual landscape of the oenach also echoed the traditions of death. The monuments at the sites included raths, carns, mounds, lia or "gravestones," and the assembly plain or race-course. The poet at Carman describes the monuments in terms of their ritual meaning: the raths are sites "where lies the host under earth's sod," the mounds are "for frequent keening of the dead," and the plains lie "under the funeral games of Carmun."¹¹

It is interesting to view these monuments through the eyes of the poet, because his beliefs tell a different story than the one we find with modern archaeology. He actually has part of his story reversed. Yes, the mounds may have been used for the ritual of keening, but the raths are not burial sites. Mounds date to the Neolithic or early Bronze Age and many do contain burials. Rathes, also known as palisade walls, date to the Iron Age and are primarily defensive structures which surrounded old Irish farmsteads.

¹⁰Maire MacNeill, The Festival of Lughnasa (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 319.

¹¹Gwynn, vol. X: 25.

They were used continuously until the coming of Christianity, but then their use eventually died out. They were not used as burial sites until much later, when they became cemeteries for those not allowed into the churchyard. By the time the poet viewed these monuments, they had assumed the role he had attributed to them.

The traditions of grief which surrounded a death also show up at the rituals of the oenach. The dindshenchas include glimpses of the rituals which surrounded a death. They tell that when King Irial died his body was taken to Cruachan and "heavily went the men round the body of the featful King, til they dug the noble king's grave." After he was buried they spent seven days there holding races around his grave.¹² Both the races held around his grave and the week spent there are traditions carried into the oenach. This length of time was not unusual. Joyce, in his A Social History of Ancient Ireland, states that for a wake "among pagan Irish, seven nights and seven days was the usual time for great persons."¹³

Following the same pattern, the fair at Carman lasted an entire week and was held every third year. Oenach Tailtenn, held by the high-king of Ireland, lasted an entire month. Games and races also took place at the oenach (these

¹²Gwynn, vol. X: 435.

¹³P.W. Joyce, A Social History of Ancient Ireland, vol. II (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) 540.

will be discussed in greater detail later). The oenach not only began from tribal death rituals, but continued many of these traditions. The oenach took place at burial sites, contained activities which focused on death, and lasted as long as the funeral wake.

The sites themselves have a history of over six thousand years, as they were first used by Neolithic peoples about 4,000 B.C. These people were the first to move into the interior of the island, as earlier hunters and gatherers had to rely on the coast and rivers for their subsistence. The Neolithic is marked by the use of agriculture. Farming allowed people to move into the island and create larger settlements. With these settlements came the need for greater social structure, which shows itself visually through the creation of large scale monuments which symbolized the cohesion between family groups. These monuments were built near settled areas, often on borders, as territorial markers. "A community could justify its claim to a piece of land, for example, by arguing that its ancestors were buried there."¹⁴

The sites of the oenachs were used continuously from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, and in many areas till this day. Settlements were rebuilt over the top of older farmsteads and new monuments were added. Yet there was a

¹⁴Alison Sheridan, "The First Farmers," Irish Archaeology Illustrated 51.

change in burial practice and social structure during the Iron Age. Burials at this time were "simple and unpretentious."¹⁵ The dead were often cremated and placed in pre-existing tumuli or newly created low mounds known as ring-barrows. During the Iron Age, Celtic peoples began to move into Ireland. Raftery believes this movement, "must have been on a relatively minor scale, with rapid subsequent absorption by indigenous cultural elements."¹⁶ Thus the continuity of sacred sites and the beliefs surrounding them remained unbroken and was amplified by the mythology of the "invading" Celts.

Celtic mythology was passed down to us through the minds and hands of Christian scribes and clerics. The Christian scribe and poet viewed these myths as mere stories and sometimes as a source of history. Yet to their creators, these myths related "a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, ab initio."¹⁷ The myths surrounding the creation of the oenach create the links between death and agriculture, the goddess and the god, the earth and the sun. An excerpt from

¹⁵Barry Raftery, "The Early Iron Age," Irish Archaeology Illustrated, 111.

¹⁶Raftery, "Early Iron Age," 108.

¹⁷Mircea Eliade, from The Sacred and the Profane (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) as found in Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural, 3rd ed., Arthur Lehmann and James Myers, eds., (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing, 1993) 36.

Mircea Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane explains what is being conceptualized in these myths:

In illo tempore a divine being, quite often a woman or a maiden, sometimes a child or a man, allowed himself to be immolated in order that tubers or fruit trees should grow from his body. This first murder basically changed the mode of being of human life. The immolation of the divine being inaugurated not only the need to eat but also the doom of death and, in consequence, sexuality, the only way to ensure the continuity of life. The body of the immolated divinity was changed into food; its soul descended under ground, where it established the Land of the Dead.¹⁸

Eliade's words are echoed by those of Macalister, "death-rites and agriculture-rites were mixed up together in Ireland as inextricably as they are to be found on other Indo-European centres."¹⁹ In all of the oenach creation myths, a woman-goddess, (and in one case a child), suffers death and burial so that her body might create a successful harvest. Her only request at death is to be honored, or "immolated" at annual harvest assemblies. She is a representation of the earth, and is bound in sacred marriage with the sun, symbolized by the god. The myths of the oenachs Tailtiu, Carman, Aillend, and Macha will now be related and analyzed in terms of the mythic need for death in the practice of agriculture.

The Lebor Gabala Erenn tells how Tailtiu, the daughter

¹⁸Eliade 38.

¹⁹R.A.S. Macalister, Tara: A Pagan Sanctuary of Ancient Ireland (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931) 161.

of Mag Mor (the Great Plain), was married to Eochu mac Erc, the King of Ireland. She was also the foster-mother of Lugh. Tailtiu was made to clear a plain of its cover of forest, and within one year she had transformed it into a field of clover. Yet the strain caused her death, and when she died, she was buried in the plain and "her games were performed every year and her song of lamentation, by Lug. With gessa and feats of arms were they performed, a fortnight before Lughnasad and a fortnight after."²⁰

The same pattern of a woman/goddess dying and her people honoring her with a yearly wake also shows up at the Oenachs of Carman, Aillend, and Macha. Carman and her three sons came to Ireland from Athens, the mother to destroy the land through charms and incantations and the sons through plundering and dishonesty. Her sons' names were Dian, Dub, and Dothur (Violent, Black, and Evil) and their father was Dibad mac Doirche mac Ainces (Extinction son of Darkness son of Ailment). They were blighting the corn of the Tuatha De Danann until finally four of the Tuatha's poets sang charms and incantations over them. The men were driven over the sea and they left their mother behind, "alive in her narrow cell,"²¹ as a pledge never to return. Before Carman died in hostageship she asked the Tuatha De Danann to hold her

²⁰R.A.S. Macalister, ed. and trans., Lebor Gabala Erenn, vol. XLI (London, Irish Texts Society, 1941) 116-117.

²¹Gwynn, vol. X: 7.

fair at her burial place. They were to perform the oenach as long as they were in Ireland.²² Another myth with the same theme is told of Oenach Aillend. It was named for the daughter of the King of Leinster, who died of shame when held in abduction by Crem Marda.²³ In both of these tales the oenach is named for a woman who was held and died in captivity.

There are several myths about the goddess Macha, all of which can be seen as representing different aspects of the same person. In the first she is the wife of Nemed, an early invader of Ireland. In this myth she is seen, like Tailtiu, as an agricultural deity who clears a plain which later bears her name. In another myth she wrests the High Kingship from two contenders when her father, the present King, dies. She marries one of the two, then captures the five sons of the other and forces them to build her rath. In this myth she symbolized the political and military power of the king.

In the final myth she arrives at the house of the peasant Crunnchu, travels sun-wise about his bed, then sleeps with him. Later that year he leaves to attend a feast of King Conchubar, after Macha warns him not to mention her name. But at the sight of the King's horses, he

²²Whitley Stokes, "The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas," Revue Celtique, vol. 15:272-336, (1894) 313.

²³Stokes 309.

forgets his promise and boasts that his wife could run faster than any of the King's steeds. The king becomes furious and forces him under pain of death to present his wife in a race against the steeds. Though heavy with child, she runs, defeats the horse, and gives birth at the finish line. But the strain kills her, and as she dies she curses the men of Ulster to an annual sickness which weakens them as a woman in labor. In her honor a mound is raised in Ulster, entitled Emain Macha, or the twins of Macha after her children.

To bewail her -- it was a worthy beginning -- was held by the Ulaid's host in full numbers yonder, to all time, the Assembly of Macha on the wide plain.²⁴

All of these myths relate the goddess to agriculture and to the celebration to the oenach. These women are all agricultural dieties. Both Tailtiu and Macha clear a forested plain so that it could then be used for cultivation. Carman and Aillend were held in captivity until they died and their "rebirth" was celebrated through the oenach. This is much like a seed, which has to be planted and symbolically die before it can spring forth as vegetation.

The oenach was intrinsically linked to the agricultural cycle. It took place on the Festival of Lughnasa, the time

²⁴Gwynn, vol. XI: 125.

of harvest, around the first of August.²⁵ At this time the sun is at its height, warming the earth and creating her rebirth as the harvest. It is no wonder then that these two gods, the earth and the sun, would be honored at this time. The name, Lugh, means "the shining one" and he is a representation of the sun. The goddesses -- Macha, Tailtiu, and Carman -- are symbols of the earth. This same stratification is found in many cultures, the Greek myths of Helios and Demeter being two examples.

Throughout Irish mythology the goddess is a personification of the land. All of the women discussed above were buried in the land where the oenach takes place. They are equated with the power of the earth to give up her fruits. But to do this, the land needs the sun for its life-giving properties. The connection between the land and the sun is mirrored in the myths surrounding the connection between the goddess and the god. In one myth, Lugh creates the oenach as a lamentation for the death of his two wives Nas and Bui. As he is married to the goddess, so must he honor her through the oenach.

Thomas Westropp tells of a legend in which Oengus creates the Lughnasa festival to commemorate the marriage of Lugh to the goddess Eriu at the time Lugh is inaugurated as

²⁵T.G.E. Powell, The Celts (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958) 149.

king.²⁶ From the goddess Eriu comes the territorial name for the whole of Ireland, Eire. Such a marriage is significant for it unites the supreme sun-god, Lugh, to the whole of the Irish earth. Throughout Irish myth Eriu is the triumphant goddess who symbolizes the wealth and fruitfulness of the land. Her counterpart, the hag (here symbolized as Carman, the "blighter of crops") must be challenged and ritually murdered to create the crop's success. Lugh symbolizes the perfect Kingship -- one which is successfully married to the land and which brings prosperity.

Another myth associated with the harvest is one of battles and wars. Again quoting from Eliade: "for the vegetable world to continue, man must kill and be killed."²⁷ In general, harvest time is not suited for battle, because all the men of the community are needed to bring the crops in. Even so, battles are an important aspect of the oenachs and this is symbolized through myth.

One of the greatest battles of Irish mythology was fought at Tailtiu between the sons of Mil and the Tuatha De Danann. In this battle, three of the sons of Mil, Eremon, Eber Finn, and Aimirgin, kill the three brothers Mac Cecht, Mac Cuill, and Mac Grene. The Tuatha De Danann's wives, Eriu, Banba, and Fodla, are in turn killed by the three

²⁶Westropp 120.

²⁷Eliade 39.

wives of the sons of Mil.²⁸ An explanation of the names is necessary to decipher the complex symbols inherent in this myth. Cuill is a derivation of goll, meaning one-eyed. Mac Cecht was said to have traveled all over Ireland before morning, a feat only accomplished by someone as swift as the sun. Grene is directly translated as the sun. The wives are, again, representatives of the land. Thus the three brothers, described in terms more than reminiscent of the sun, are combined into one trinitarian deity and are united with the earth.

The sons of Mil, as newcomers to Ireland, are displaying their right to rule Ireland by conquering its former inhabitants. In so doing, they are also conquering the earth and the sun and commanding them to be obedient. In the legends following this battle, the Tuatha De Danann are forced into the hollow hills of Ireland. They are the forces of nature, the earth itself, and the fairies of later folklore.

The myths described above are not static imaginations, but were expressed ritually through the practice of the oenachs. The oenachs took place at burial sites near settled farmsteads. They derive from an older tradition of tribal honor and respect for the dead. At a later period the traditions of these rites find their fulfillment in the kingship. It is interesting to note that "queenship" did

²⁸MacNeill 32.

not develop into a politically or socially accepted power in Ireland, so that all the responsibilities of a province lay solely on the king.

Byrne, in his book Irish Kings and High Kings, states that the king had few governmental duties except to preside over the oenach and to act as war-leader. He also believes that the King held more priestly power than the druids, and was the sole "spiritual" leader of the people.²⁹ The king found his role model in the sun-god Lugh. He was hedged in with "tabus and prerogatives (gessa and buada)" which defined his role as a religious leader of the people.³⁰ The King of Tara presided over Oenach Tailtiu. Two of his tabus included not letting the sun rise on him in Tara and not travelling over Mag Cuilinne past sunset. Here the king himself must take on the role of the sun-god.

The king's connection or marriage to the goddess of the land was also important: "Tailtiu uttered in her land a true prophecy, that so long as every prince should accept her, Erin should not be without perfect song."³¹ The king was the symbolic sun-god whose marriage to the earth ensured a successful harvest. The consequences of not holding the fair at Carman are duly stated:

²⁹Francis John Byrne, Irish Kings and High Kings (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973) 23.

³⁰Byrne 23.

³¹Gwynn, vol. XI: 151.

There comes for neglect of it
baldness, weakness, early greyness,
kings without keenness or jollity,
without hospitality or truth.³²

But if it is held:

Corn, milk, peace, happy ease,
full nets, ocean's plenty,
greybearded men, chieftains in amity
with troops overbearing Erin.³³

The high-king would fast at the oenach in order to keep his land from disease. He would also eat a ritual meal that ensured his victory in every battle.³⁴

The social and political functions of the oenach were also related to the king's role. As a meeting between people they allowed for entertainments, feasts, and games which symbolized the king's goodwill and power. They were also a time for the king to hold council with his people, to promote new laws, and to decide on disputes.

One of the chief games of the oenach was the horse races. In fact, Cormac derives the word oenach from aine-ech, "delightfulness of horses."³⁵ Although archaeology proves that the horse was in Ireland before the Celts, legends place the introduction of the horse into Ireland

³²Gwynn, vol. X: 25.

³³Gwynn 17.

³⁴Byrne 23.

³⁵Michael Dames, Mythic Ireland (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992) 85.

with the coming of Lugh.³⁶

Horse races are a tradition found at every oenach. There were seven horse-races, one for each day, at Oenach Carman. Cruachan was an "oenaig ech-tressa," a "meeting for horse-races."³⁷ At Tailtiu horses were made to swim through the Blackwater as a protection against disease.³⁸ The oenach of Lough Gur is surrounded by legends of the horse. The word gur means "keen" and "painful," and gure, "pangs." The lough is known locally as the "hatching lake." Legends state that Finn believes it to be the lake where Aine gave birth to a horse. The pangs of birth are related to the harvest, when the earth labors for her fruits. Also at Lough Gur, the horses of the Fianna came to race with those of the Munstermen.³⁹ This is another form of battle wherein the horses fight for their mortal leaders as symbols of one's superiority.

Horses were also a symbol of the cohesion between the king and the land. In a tale told, not without horror, by Gerald of Wales, the goddess is symbolized by a white mare. The mare is slaughtered, the king bathes in her blood, and

³⁶O hOgain 251.

³⁷Gwynn, vol. X: 351.

³⁸MacNeill 337.

³⁹Dames 85.

her flesh becomes part of the sacred meal.⁴⁰ Though the ferocity of this rite is probably over-exaggerated by Gerald for political reasons, it contains a kernel of truth. The sacrifice of the mare forms a sacred marriage between the King and the territory she symbolizes. This is another variant of the myth of the sun-god and the earth-goddess.

The horse was also a representation of the solar deity, for the horse, the fastest of terrestrial animals, is often compared to the sun, the swift traveller of the heavens. Nowhere is this connection made more firmly than at Oenach Macha. Macha was not only a horse-goddess, defeating the king's horses in a running race, but also, "in her roofless dwelling in the west she was Grian, the sun of womankind."⁴¹ One of the games held at Oenach Macha was a race between the women; the traditional horse races were held as well.

The oenachs also provided great entertainment. The word oenach was glossed into Latin as "theatrum, spectaculum, and circus."⁴² Oenach Tailtiu was a meeting place for the aes side, and the poets' recitations were a cause of much pleasure. In 689 the Fragmentary Annals of

⁴⁰Gerald of Wales, The History and Topography of Ireland, John J. O'Meara (trans), (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1982) 109-110.

⁴¹Gwynn, vol. XI: 125.

⁴²Edmund Hogan, Onomasticon Goedelicum: Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1910) 558.

Ireland tell of a woman satirist who sang at the death of Diarmait of Mide son of Airmedach Caech, the "one-eyed":

This was the apple of a golden apple-tree,
the king of the great sea, son of a one-eyed man.⁴³

Poets and storytellers at Carman would tell:

Tales of Find and Fianna, a matter inexhaustible,
sacks, forays, wooings,
tablets, and books of lore,
satires, keen riddles,

as well as "dark lays of the Dindshenchas."⁴⁴

Music was also an important aspect of the gathering and tended to incite general merriment amongst the crowds:

Pipes, fiddles, gleemen,
bones-players and bag-pipers,
a crowd hideous, noisy, profane,
shriekers and shouters.⁴⁵

Both "poets and meek musicians" were cited as Carman's "great privileges."⁴⁶

Women and men were kept apart at both Carman and Tailtiu and the poet attests that no elopements were to be heard of. The women were to sit on their slope of embroidery while the men met for council. Yet one of the eighteenth century survivals of Oenach Tailtiu was the "Telltown marriage." This signified a cursory engagement or trial marriage that could easily be broken. For this game,

⁴³Joan Newlon Radner, ed., Fragmentary Annals of Ireland (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978) 39.

⁴⁴Gwynn, vol. X: 21.

⁴⁵Gwynn, vol. X: 21.

⁴⁶Gwynn, vol. X: 21.

men and women were separated from each other's sight by a high wall. The choosing of a wife was carried out only by sight of her hand, as presented through a gateway. Whatever man clasped her hand was obliged to take her into his home for a year and a day. After this time they could meet back at the Rath of Telltown and if the relationship was unsatisfactory, receive permission for separation. With this, the young were even permitted to try their luck again!⁴⁷ These marriages were celebrated in a particular hollow which is still called Lag-an-aenaigh (Laganeany), the hollow of the fair.⁴⁸

The Dindshenchas also tell three legends of a woman being captured and taken away from the oenach. In one, Clidna, the queen of the gathering, was carried off by Ciaban mac Echach Imderg. He took Clidna out in a boat and left her on the waves as he went off on a "giddy venture." But after he had gone a great wave came and drowned her.⁴⁹ In another, Maistiu, the daughter of Oengus, is carried out of Oenach Oengussa.⁵⁰ The third capture is from the well-known tale of the wooing of Etain. The Dindshenchas add a slight change to the tale, stating that it was at Oenach

⁴⁷Westropp, "the Marriages of the Gods at the Sanctuary of Tailtiu," FOLKLORE 27 (1890): 125.

⁴⁸P.W. Joyce, The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places, vol 1, (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1910) 202.

⁴⁹Gwynn, vol. X: 207.

⁵⁰Stokes 312.

Cruachan when Midir came to bear off Etian and her handmaid Crochen.⁵¹ All of these legends and folk practices bear witness to the fact that, no matter what the oenachs' beginnings, at some point they became a place for meetings and matches between the sexes.

These traditions of elopement may stem from a belief that the individuals should emulate the gods in their sacred marriage. Yet the traditions of separation stem from much older rites. As noted above in the description of King Irial's death, it is his men who dig his grave and then institute his games. It is the men who take an active role in the tribal assemblies, the king-ship, and the oenachs.

The oenachs were also a time for political and legal engagements. Law tracts from the eighth century state that every king must convene an oenach at regular intervals.⁵² In the Genemain Aeda Slane the Fair of Tailtiu is put on par with the Feast of Tara as a place where the laws and ordinances made were binding on everyone.⁵³ Oenach Carman was a "week for promulgating the judgements and laws of the province for a year."⁵⁴

There they would discuss with strife of speech
the dues and tributes of the province

⁵¹Gwynn, vol. X: 351.

⁵²Barry Raftery, Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) 81.

⁵³Binchy 116.

⁵⁴Stokes 314.

every legal enactment right piously
every third year it was settled.⁵⁵

These sites were important not only as social and ritual centers, but as places where political judgements were made.

The site of the oenach was also frequently a site of battle. As the king who presided over the oenach was also the king of the region, many battles were fought by those who wanted to gain ascendancy over the reigning king. In 841 Feidlimid, the King and Bishop of Cashel, led his men to Carman intending to proclaim his reign of Leinster by leading the Oenach, but he was headed off by the high-king Niall mac Aeda.⁵⁶ Because of its association with the high-kingship, Tailtiu was often the site of battle. Oenach Tailtiu is often romanticized as a "national assembly" to which all of the regional kings of Ireland must attend as vassals to the high-king. D.A. Binchy, in his article on the Fair of Tailtiu, proves otherwise; he shows that because all disturbances to the fairs were made by regional kings, Oenach Tailtiu's prominence was also regional.⁵⁷

The tradition of oenach battles even survives into modern folklore and folk-practice. Maire MacNeill notes that in Irish folklore the growth of crops is believed to be

⁵⁵Gwynn, vol. XI: 19.

⁵⁶Byrne 225-226.

⁵⁷Binchy 118-121.

the concern of the fairies. Fairies from one district will fight with the fairies of another to ensure that their own crops are successful and the other's blighted. She believes the "notion that a battle could bring fruitfulness to one side or another is...the explanation of faction-fights on the assembly hills."⁵⁸

Many of the battles which took place at the oenachs could have had ritual as well as political significance. Thus it is not unusual for battles to be another tradition of the oenach. Oenach Luimnech (Limerick) is one "held with victories."⁵⁹ In the dindshenchas concerning Loch Ri there is an allusion to the "destruction of Oenach Oengussa," but it is unexplainable. As successful battles were a symbol of prosperity, so too were successful warriors to be praised and honored at the oenach. Oenach Aillend is called "an assembly for our warriors."⁶⁰ Only men proven in battle were worthy of the Fiana, Fionn Mac Cumhail's warrior band. Candidates for the Fiana were received into the group at Tailtiu.⁶¹

One particularly moving tale about the creation of an oenach revolves around the warrior Cuchulainn and his son.

⁵⁸MacNeill 408.

⁵⁹Gwynn, vol. X: 271.

⁶⁰Stokes 309.

⁶¹Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1961) 170.

This is the only tale of the death of a boy creating the oenach. Oen-fir Aife, "Aife's only man," was the son of Aife and Cuchulainn. While he was still a young boy his mother sent him from Scotland to encounter his father. At the meeting Cuchulainn murdered his son before he knew whom it was that he slew. "Sad the lament that was raised by fierce Cuchulaind -- it grew a custom: the Ulaid came in muster to bewail his son."⁶²

No date has been set for the beginning of the oenach. Some scholars believe that it is impossible to set a date for the oenach: "From the point of view of archaeology we can say little about their origins and we can only guess that some of them, perhaps most, have roots in the pre-Christian Iron Age."⁶³ Finding a correct date is also difficult because of the oenach sites which have been identified none have been excavated and many were used until recent times.⁶⁴ Despite these problems, a better understanding of the origin date of the oenachs can be found. The dindshenchas, the physical nature of the sites, and the mythology all point to an origin date of between 600 and 100 B.C., during the Iron Age of Ireland.

⁶²Gwynn, vol. XI: 125.

⁶³Raftery, Pagan Celtic Ireland, 82.

⁶⁴Nancy Edwards, The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 97.

Medieval historians who recited and preserved the dindshenchas often devised what were to their mind logical dates for certain occurrences. Wanting to set a date for the oenachs, the poet from Oenach Carman said that five hundred years had passed from the origin of the oenachs to the birth of Christ. Since the poem would have been recited almost 1500 years after this point its factual integrity is questionable. Yet it is clear from his statement that the people knew the assembly had been started long before the coming of Christianity to Ireland and even before the birth of Christ.

The physical nature of the oenach sites offers a clue to the mystery of the fairs' beginnings. As stated above, the sites consisted of raths, mounds, stones, cairns, and plains. Rathes were generally created during the early Iron Age, about 500 B.C., and were used as residences until the coming of Christianity. The mounds, cairns, and standing stones are primarily burial or ritual sites and date to a much earlier period -- the Neolithic or early Bronze Age. For raths to be built in such close proximity to the monuments shows that later peoples continued to use sacred sites for tribal assembly. The raths, as a larger, more permanent type of settlement, signify that great social changes took place during the Iron Age. This may have been in part due to the coming of the Celts; it may also be associated with the strengthening of tribal chieftains into

kings. With the coming of more definite divisions in land and power, this was also a transition period for the rituals which symbolized these powers. Thus, the transition from a death centered ritual to an agricultural, harvest assembly probably took place at the time the raths were built.

The oenach is intrinsically linked to the cult of the god Lugh. Yet his cult did not arrive in Ireland until late. T.G.E. Powell believes that the god Lugh was a newcomer to the Irish pantheon, introduced to Ireland by Gaulish settlers as late as the first century BC.⁶⁵ On the continent, representatives from the tribes of Gaul used to meet in an assembly at Lugdunum. This assembly, like the Irish oenach, took place in August. It was Romanized in 12 B.C., after it had become a cultural establishment.⁶⁶ As the Lughnasa festival and the oenach are in many areas one and the same thing, it follows that the oenach as it was known in the Medieval period was not created until after the coming of Lugh, sometime after the beginning waves of the Celts in 600 B.C. and before the turn of the millenium.

When Christianity came to Ireland it tended to apply the prevalent beliefs of the people to its own doctrines. Thus, even after Ireland was Christianized, activities of a pagan nature continued at the oenachs. The earliest written

⁶⁵Powell 149.

⁶⁶H.D. Rankin, Celts and the Classical World (London: Croom Helm, 1987) 192.

lore about Tailtiu actually tells of its conversion to Christianity. Tirechan's Breviary, written in the late seventh century, and the Vita Tripartita describe Patrick's visit to Tailtiu. While there he blessed the assembly ground so that no corpse could ever be taken away from it.⁶⁷ Each fair also had certain patron saints:

Though Tailtiu was a sanctuary for the flock,
God gave friends to guard it, Patrick,
Brigit, white Becan, Mac Eirc, Eithne,
Adamnan.⁶⁸

At Carman, Patrick and Brigit as well as Caemgen and Columgile "are warranty against every troop."⁶⁹

The power of the church over the oenach was shown in 806 when the monastery of Tallaght imposed a boycott on Oenach Tailtiu so effective that there was "neither horse nor chariot run." This was in response to the violation of their termann (an area which had the privilege of ecclesiastical sanctuary) by Aedh Oirdnidhe mac Niall, then the high-king. He eventually paid reparation to the community by giving them their full demand plus many gifts.⁷⁰

It was also essential that a churchman be present at the assemblies. Unfortunately the texts are silent on the

⁶⁷MacNeill 324-325.

⁶⁸Gwynn, vol. XI: 159.

⁶⁹Gwynn, vol. X: 15.

⁷⁰John O'Donovan, Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, vol. I (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co., 1854) 417.

attendance of druids to the oenach in pagan times. It may be assumed, though, that as one of the major festivals of the Irish year, druids were in attendance at the fair. The king at Tailtiu usually ate his ritual meal in the presence of a cleric and both clerics and laymen were in attendance at Carman. The Dindshenchas poem for Carman gives the only evidence of Christian ritual being transposed onto the fair. Near the end of the assembly the "saint" would hold "mass, genuflection, chanting of psalms."⁷¹ The law tracts also state that only the Feni, the land-holding freemen who were also designated as "nemed" or holy, were allowed to participate in the oenach.⁷²

The Annals for 539 also relate an interesting story of ecclesiastical power. While at the fair of Tailtiu a man named Abacuc took false witness upon the hand of Ciaran. The Saint placed his hand upon the neck of Abacuc so that it was taken with gangrene and fell off!⁷³ In fact, the "three marvels" of Oenach Tailtiu are a headless man, a boy of seven who can stand on one's finger, and a priest who fell from the sky into the assembly.⁷⁴

Eventually, the oenachs began to lose their role as pagan religious centers. Churches began to take over the

⁷¹Gwynn, vol. X: 23.

⁷²Byrnes 36.

⁷³O'Donovan 183.

⁷⁴MacNeill 327.

celebration of the oenachs as the power of the kings waned. Some of the larger monasteries began holding their own oenachs. In 800 A.D., the community at Lusk, Co. Dublin, led an oenach; and by the ninth and tenth centuries many of the oenachs had become "proper markets" for the trade and sale of goods.⁷⁵

The Annals attest that the oenachs were frequently disturbed during the Norse invasions. Tailtiu was revived in 1006 by Maelsechlainn after an interval of 79 years, but the Annals fall silent on Oenach Tailtiu after 1170.⁷⁶ Oenach Carman also was last celebrated in 1023 by Donaghmac Gillapatrik.⁷⁷ As the power of the kings died out with the coming of the English, the oenachs were taken over by the people and the church, and turned into market-fairs and rural gatherings. Oenach Tailtiu survived in this form until about 1770, and continued another thirty years by moving south of the river to Martry and by changing its date to the 15th of August, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.⁷⁸ Many of the harvest traditions continued into this century, including a meal of the first fruits and various patterns that were held on or around the first Sunday in August. The Irish language still calls the month of August after

⁷⁵Edwards 97.

⁷⁶MacNeill 335.

⁷⁷Stokes 315.

⁷⁸MacNeill 336.

Lughnasa.

Thus, the oenach was an important assembly to the ancient Irish for it symbolized the welfare and prosperity of the land. It was celebrated at sacred sites associated with the power of the ancestors and began as a ritual to honor the dead. Though this type of ritual began thousands of years before in the Neolithic, it eventually grew into the oenach during the Iron Age. The coming of the Celts and the growth of a powerful kingship were the two main catalysts in creating the oenach. The Celts brought a mythology which was applied to the pre-existing rites, and the kingship solidified the political, economic, and social need for such an assembly.

Though couched in the symbols of goddess, god, and mythological battle, the intertwining themes of the oenach were death and agriculture. They permeated the assembly from the physical nature of the site to the activities that took place there. The assembly met at sites of sacred burials, places where the agricultural diety had given up her life that the crops might grow. The oenach was led by the local king, whose presence and leadership at the fair mirrored the divine Lugh and who commemorated the death of the goddess through the oenach. The battles, games, and horse races that took place at the fair were symbols of the community's right to prosperity, life, and social cohesion.

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